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# THEOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION: SOME ASPECTS TO CONSIDER BEFORE CHOOSING A SCHEME

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Schemes, adaptations, and variations of schemes for the classification of theological materials are still being devised. Several have been published recently. Eagerly awaited is the sixteenth edition of the Dewey Decimal which most users of that system hope will improve the present unsatisfactory schedules in the Dewey 200 class. Administrators, faculties and/or librarians responsible for the choice of a scheme for their libraries must be made aware of the fact that the satisfactory classification of theological material is extremely difficult. There is no easy answer for those who ask, "Which of the existing schemes is best for theological libraries?"

The purpose of this paper is not to prove that there is a superior, ready-made classification scheme available but rather to bring certain considerations to the attention of those responsible for choosing a scheme. In any institution the final choice is a very serious matter, for once the cataloging processes are under way, a change cannot be effected without the expenditure of vast sums of money. Future generations are bound by the decision.

Of course, there are those who say, "It doesn't matter where you class a book, as long as it can be found through the catalog." This is true in a way, and unless we have open shelves and a classification scheme that will do an adequate job in bringing people and books together, we might as well shelve books by accession number in the order that they are received, or by size or color, and forget about subject classification. On the other hand, there are those who believe that no catalog, however perfect it may be, can be an adequate substitute for attractive, well-lighted, open stacks where faculty and students may actually examine the books.

At the present time there are eight or ten printed schemes available for the classification of theological materials. The most popular in American seminaries are Dewey, Union, and Library of Congress. According to information found in the American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings, Ninth Annual Conference (pages 49-60), 105 seminary libraries are organized under Dewey, 32 under Union, and 23 under the Library of Congress. Libraries with 100,000 or more volumes total 20 in number, but only six are organized under Dewey, while seven are under the Library of Congress and three under Union. Four are under their own system.

No institution should adopt a classification scheme blindly. Deciding on the basis of what the majority are doing, taking advice from friends, following a leading seminary, or calling for a faculty vote, is not the answer. Neither is a casual reading of or acquaintance with one of the schemes. One should carefully examine recommended schemes, looking for the weak spots and discovering what kinds of schedules and notations are offered in areas where classification is especially difficult. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to point out such areas, and to provide a summary list of desirable qualifications for a scheme.

Lists of desirable features for classification schemes are available, but most lists seem to emphasize features such as short call numbers or notations, availability of the numbers on Library of Congress printed cards, and similar considerations. These are important, but we must not overlook the fact that as good as any scheme may be, it still may not be in harmony with the educational philosophy of a particular school, or it may have serious weaknesses in certain subject areas vital in the school curriculum. A basic consideration of theological classification is the recognition that there are a number of important elements in a classification scheme, among them viewpoint, specific subject, relationships, form, language, time, and place.

Most schemes begin with provision for a breakdown into main classes or broad subjects such as philosophy, religion, and so on. The schemes then proceed to divide these main classes, but they make use of the above listed elements in various ways. This is probably why we have ardent advocates and equally vigorous opponents of the several schemes. A great deal depends upon the orientation of the librarian and/or institution, as they encounter and deal with the specific treatment of the different elements.

Each of the six elements of a classification scheme which have already been mentioned suggests an area of difficulty in theological classification. In the following pages the principal features of a satisfactory theological classification scheme will be presented and the classification problems which seem to make these features desirable will be discussed briefly.

An adequate classification scheme for theological materials ought to include the following attributes in addition to the well-known desirable features of over-all simplicity, an adequate index to the scheme, short call numbers, provision for the possible use of numbers on Library of Congress printed cards, and so on.

1. The treatment of materials should be objective, keeping subject materials together without regard to theological viewpoint.

The treatment of viewpoint is probably one of the most difficult elements with which to deal in the classification of religious material. It can be pointed out that the Library of Congress scheme for religion is strong in bringing out religious viewpoint before specific subject. There are excellent schedules for the various religions and denominations, each providing a place for subjects such as devotional works, hymns, liturgy, sacraments, and missions. On the other hand, Dewey makes some attempt to

bring the material together by broad subject first, and then provides for an arrangement by viewpoint or on some other basis. It is not surprising that those who wish to emphasize the literature of their own faith, denomination or sect seem to prefer to work with the Library of Congress schedules or to expand similar schedules without revising any of the fundamental cleavages of the Library of Congress schedules.

Closely related to the problem of general viewpoint is the matter of controversial material or literature attacking the viewpoint. Some of the schemes do not separate material about a faith from literature or propaganda attacking it. The Dewey people have attempted to provide for "pro" and "con" material in several ways. One of their suggestions is to use standard marks such as plus and minus or p and c. Note their decision not to use 289.52, "Unauthorized works" under Christian Science, in the fifteenth edition. The explanation is that the term "unauthorized" does not represent characteristics which are bibliographically demonstrable.

If viewpoint or religious slant is to be the first consideration, materials will then fall into one of several main categories such as non-sectarian, Catholic, Protestant, or non-Christian. Division by country and then by specific sect may follow, although the form of the material and even language may take precedence. In any case, the different elements must be reckoned with, and it is at precisely this point that differences of opinion arise. There are those who feel that to consider viewpoint first is to take a backward step. The old divisions into Christian, with a large number of subdivisions for sects, and non-Christian, with the subdivisions into various religions, may be inadequate for a modern theological library that strives to present its wealth of material on religion in an objective way.

American schemes have allotted most of their religion space to strictly American Protestant materials, and patrons have had difficulty finding out what other religions have had to say on the subject under consideration. The emphasis on the denominational affiliation of the author has often made difficult the comparative use of books on the same topics, and seems to assume that readers have little interest in the works of writers outside the sect to which the author belongs. Where classification schemes emphasize denominational affiliation of authors, certain schedules in other areas may be impoverished.

Some of our classification schemes were prepared during an era when what was said was less important than who said it. In this day of theoretical ecumenicity, libraries may very well provide a service by accentuating the thought, rather than the thinker.

The ideal for the specialist in the field of history may be a primary cleavage along denominational lines, but many more theological students are interested in a topical treatment which provides simultaneously for all points of view upon the same topics. Under such an arrangement the student knows there is a single progression, although conclusions may differ. Books dealing specifically with the denomination or its polity would be an exception.

2. The arrangement of subject materials should follow a logical order so that subjects are not broken down and widely scattered according to their particular phases.

Classification schemes should be closely scrutinized in connection with the treatment of specific subjects. Some schemes provide too many places for the same subject and the result is an unfortunate scattering. This is especially true if there is little continuity in cataloging personnel. As an example, let us consider the subject of prayer. The literature is composed of books on how to pray and also books containing prayers. The material may be concerned with public or private prayer. This material should not be scattered.

Another example is found in liturgy and ritual. This kind of material may be assigned to a separate class labeled "Liturgy and ritual," or placed with history, church history, denominational polity, or history of the denomination.

Ecumenical materials also pose numerous problems for any architect of a classification scheme. Proposed unions of denominations, actual unions, church cooperation, inter-faith and interdenominational agencies, may be provided for in several places because some movements stem from doctrinal reconciliation and others from practical interests of the churches.

3. Artificial categories should be kept to a minimum.

The fact that many topics provided for under religion also have counterparts or closely related subjects in other places makes for considerable difficulty. The area of related subjects is another aspect of a classification scheme that should be examined very closely. What topics or subjects are distinctively religious and as such ought to be treated under the main class labeled religion?

The authors of classification schemes have perhaps tried to make too much of the religion class. As a result, catalogers have classified material in religion that could have been and should have been classified elsewhere. Some have even forced material into the religion class because they wanted certain items to be counted in their inventory of religious books. Yet most people should know that it is impossible to determine how many volumes a library has on the subject of religion by counting all those in the 200 class in Dewey, or BL-BX classes in Library of Congress.

The following are samples of historical subjects that present problems because they are a part of, or are closely related to other historical subjects which may be provided for in other classes:

History of religion
History of religions by broad groupings
History of denominations and sects
Religious development by countries
Doctrines and movements
Heresies and schisms
Missions
Church fathers
Judaism, Old Testament, Palestine, etc.

Biography has often proved to be difficult to handle because of overlapping. Biography is history, but it is often most usefully classed with the subject to which the individual contributed his major life work. With this few would disagree, but once it is determined that an individual had something to do with religion, what then? Some schemes further divide by home missions, foreign missions, ordained clergy, unordained preachers, evangelists, theologians, denominational leaders, and so on. One scheme suggests that if a clergyman serves only one parish, his work should be classified with that parish. Perhaps we have tried to make biography too complex. Surely there are insurmountable problems if one tries to pin an individual down to one facet of his relationship with religion.

Provision for religious education materials has often proved to be unsatisfactory in our present schemes. There is much overlapping with the so-called secular works on education; and materials in related areas such as audio-visual teaching aids, recreation, and camping, present constant problems in classification.

Actually our classification schemes may reflect an older view which labeled everything sacred or secular. Yet it seems to be much more realistic and helpful to have all educational materials together and then to divide them, rather than to have two or more distinct sections in one library. Religious educators have much to learn from the secular works on educational theory and method, and some of our public school people could benefit by being exposed to some of the better works in the field of religious education.

Still other topics, such as religious ethics, religious sociology, religious art and music, and even philosophy, cause their share of difficulty in most of our schemes.

4. An adequate and standardized table for form divisions should be provided.

Division of material by form, provision for it, or lack of such provision, may be one of the most serious defects in all our schemes. There is a complete lack of consistency at this point. Some schedules will provide separate numbers for material that could be handled by form division notation, and in other instances refer to form division tables. There is need for an all-inclusive table that would provide for all the variations known to us at this time. If one could be devised, and a practical notation system worked out, we would automatically solve a great many of our problems. Such a table should make extensive use of mnemonic devices and principles.

Users of a pure notation, such as Dewey, might find it more practical to use letters or combinations of letters to accomplish the best results and to avoid lengthy sets of zeros. It would be much wiser to provide for the inevitable local unauthorized expansions of schemes by an adequate form division device, than to invite the appropriation of open numbers which may be needed and even eventually authorized for new subjects. Suggested additions to the customary form divisions now found in various published tables might include provision for such items as:

Graded curriculum materials of all kinds, by grade
Ungraded curriculum materials of all kinds
Audio-visual material of all kinds
Individual authors--works by and about authors, such as letters, essays, autobiography, journals, criticism, sources, concordances, collected works, selections, translations, etc.
Biography, with distinct symbols for collective and individual biographies
Viewpoint
Language and dialect
Holy days and holidays
Religious denominations and sects
Geography
Chronology

5. The element of language should be minimized except in the handling of Biblical texts.

The language and dialect element is usually considered at some point in most schedules. This division should normally be minimized. Just as who says something is not as important as what is said, the language is less important than the subject. After receiving a number of questions through the years from patrons who asked if the library had any material in a certain little-known language, however, I feel that we might do well to file an extra card by language when we are cataloging a minor tongue, or a language of which we will probably always have a very small collection. There is no particular reason to do this except to be able to answer the curious, or, in rare instances, the scholar who asks to see all our material in some obscure language or dialect.

The Bible may be one exception to the minimizing of division by language. Patrons often ask for Biblical textual material by language, and since the Bible has been issued in so many divisions, sections, and parts, and in about one thousand languages and dialects, it does seem unfortunate to scatter little-known languages.

6. Adequate provision should be made for the elements of time and place.

Several of the schemes now in use have extensive provision for certain types of religious literature, particularly the class known as Christian literature. Schemes should be examined very carefully at this point to determine the nature of the class. Is there provision for a terminal date? Are catalogers instructed to ignore subject content in order to keep authors together on the shelves?

Some schemes provide for a topical classification only for current materials, indicating that materials from the nineteenth century and before do not warrant subject treatment. The explanation is given that their primary interest is historical. The question must be raised as to what we will do with twentieth-century materials in the twenty-first

century. It is true that a good subject catalog will come to the rescue of a searcher who discovers library materials classified by individual authors, yet author catalogs have been much more efficient tools than subject catalogs. Perhaps it would be more desirable to bring an individual author's works together in the catalog and assemble by subject on the shelves.

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With these considerations before us, it may well be observed that none of the existing schemes is ideal, and that the ultimate choice should be the scheme best suited to local needs. Perhaps sometime in the future we may see a synthesis of the various fine theological schedules, combined with an adequate formula, and an adequate notation. Then we may have our ideal classification scheme, and there will be no problems involved in making a choice, as there are today. Meanwhile, the best advice is to proceed with great caution and much study of a minimum of three schemes before making the final decision.